

## Lesson 2 – Case Study – Solution-Focused Therapy

**TLO:** Identify the principles of solution-focused therapy

**ELOs:** Explain how the seven principles of solution-focused therapy support the counselee.  
Define the requirements of describing a problem.  
Identify the qualities of well-formed goals.

*The Chaplain is about 15 minutes into the initial interview with this client couple. They have been married 12 years. Nick is a 31 year-old E-6 platoon sergeant and Karen is a 30 year-old stay at home mother of three kids ages 8, 4, and 2. The idea of counseling is clearly the wife's idea, and she has enthusiastically chronicled his shortcomings as a husband and father. He has been fairly quiet so far, so you decide to engage him a little more and involve him in the process.*

Chaplain: Nick, it sounds like your wife is not very happy with how things are going at home.

Nick: Yea, this is pretty much what I hear at home a lot. I've heard all this before.

Chaplain: She seems to have a pretty clear idea of what needs to change for her to enjoy this marriage. [Turning to Karen] You want Nick to talk to play with the kids more when he gets home so you get a break, you want him to talk with you more in the evenings after the kids go to bed, and you want him to help you more with housework. Did I hear you correctly?

Karen: Yes, and I can't believe he doesn't even care how I feel. The more I talk the more he just stares off into the distance or walks away from me. Is that any way for a husband to act towards his wife?

Chaplain: Nick, can you tell me about a time when your marriage did not have these problems?

Nick: I think our marriage is not that bad, even now. But it was a lot better before our second child was born five years ago.

Chaplain: really? Tell me about that.

Nick: Well, before we had any kids life was a lot easier. Karen had a job at the bank and seemed a lot happier. She had good friends there, and I guess it helped her feel important, and she was easier to get along with when I got home.

Chaplain: So Karen had other adults around her during the day and that helped her stay positive.

Nick: Yea, I think so. Now she just has the kids all day long; 2 are at home all day.

Chaplain: So back when the marriage was better, before Chelsea was born, what would happen when you got home from work?

Nick: She would have dinner ready, or we would go out for dinner, and she didn't nag me from the moment I walked in the door.

Chaplain: The two of you enjoyed your meals together as a time of connection.

Nick: Yes, without the kids it was a lot easier.

Chaplain: If I was a fly on your wall back in those days, after dinner, what would I see you doing?

Nick: We would watch TV together. We like crime shows like CSI and Cold Case.

Karen: But the old CSI is better, the one in Las Vegas. Even though Grissom is gone, it is better than CSI Miami or New York.

Nick: [Rolling his eyes] I know. [Turning to the Chaplain] She does not like Miami. I think it is cool.

Karen: You just want to see the babes who are wearing next to nothing.

Chaplain: Hang on. So after enjoying dinner together the two of you would watch TV together and you felt close?

Nick: Yes.

Chaplain: Were you on separate chairs or couches when you watched TV together?

Nick: Oh no, we would usually cuddle up on the leather couch, maybe get some popcorn and beer.

Chaplain: Those were special times for you as a couple.

Nick: I guess so. Hell of a lot better than now.

Chaplain: Karen, as you look back at those times of enjoying dinner together and watching TV on the couch, how was that for you?

Karen: Yes, those were better days. I just can't see how we can get back there. [She looks down, sadness in her voice more than anger, but clearly moved by the thoughts of better days.]

Chaplain: Let's do something a little crazy. [They look up, wondering what is next] I want you to use your imagination with me. Let's say that tonight, while you are sleeping, the Lord performs a miracle for you, and the problems you are having today just disappear – they are instantly fixed. [Karen looks down, perhaps thinking this is impossible and stupid, but Nick stays engaged]. But here's the catch [Karen looks back up]. Neither of you knows it. I mean, this miracle has happened but no one told you about it. You didn't see it happen, but now you will see the effects of the miracle. So, when you wake up tomorrow, the problems are fixed. What are

the first signs you will see that give you a clue that something is different, that the Lord gave you this miracle?

Karen: I don't think I'll see anything because he goes to work before any of us gets up. It's always just me and the kids.

Chaplain: OK, Nick is not there, but your problems with Nick have disappeared. What will you see different between you and the kids.

Karen: [She thinks for several seconds, indicating she has accepted that this miracle has occurred]. Well, if I'm not mad at Nick, I guess I would not yell at the kids so much. Sometimes I'm just pissed off at them as soon as I see their messy rooms in the morning.

Chaplain: So you would already be more positive and not yell at the kids from the start of your day.

Karen: I don't know, I guess so.

Chaplain: Nick, what would be the first sign in your day that this miracle has happened?

Nick: [Answering quickly, he seems to know right away how things would be different.] It would be when I am ready to go home. Right now I usually don't feel like going home because I know things suck. But if the miracle happened and things were like the old days, I would want to go home and have dinner with her and the kids.

Chaplain: And when you walked in the door at home, what would be the next sign that the miracle has occurred?

Nick: She would have dinner ready and would be glad to see me.

Chaplain: That sounds like how things were before the kids. Tell me, how would you know that Karen is glad to see you?

Nick: Well, I guess I'd just see a smile when I came around the corner into the kitchen, maybe. That'd be nice...

Chaplain: Yeah, that sounds nice. What a great miracle... Let me check on something: You said earlier that right now your satisfaction in this marriage is at a 4 and Karen is at a 3. If you guys had a day where you [Karen] were more positive with the kids, and you [Nick] came home, were greeted by your wife, helped get the kids in bed, and then watched a TV show together with popcorn [pauses to let that picture settle in their minds], what would your level of satisfaction be at the end of that day?

Nick: It would be a 6 or a 7.

Chaplain: Wow, that's a huge jump for just one day. Sounds like just a couple of changes in your day can make a big difference.

Nick: I guess so.

Chaplain: What about you Karen?

Karen: I would go up 1 or 2, but there's still other stuff wrong in our marriage.

Chaplain: Yeah, no doubt. Things are never simple. But it sounds like this would be a step in the right direction.

Karen: Yeah.

*The Chaplain did not dwell too long on all the complaining. Instead, he turned the conversation to an exception, and then used the miracle question to open up the possibility of positive change happening today. Scaling was used to measure progress, and later in the session the Chaplain got them to agree to the short-term goal of going out to dinner one night this next week, and spend one night watching a favorite TV show with popcorn. This goal was do-able, easily measured, and something known to work in their life, not the Chaplain's idea. Instead of trudging through the problem talk of what is going wrong, the Chaplain chose to re-create what is known to work, and count on the new positive environment to motivate them to make additional changes to move forward.*

### **Case Study Discussion Questions:**

1. What did you like about how the Chaplain led this conversation?
2. How do you think a conversation like this could have helped this couple?
3. Interestingly, the Chaplain appears to ignore some of the anger and problems and jibes this husband and wife throw at each other. This is apparently not by accident. Why do you think he did that? What do you like or not like about this pastoral choice?
4. At first this couple is slow to work with the Chaplain and start describing this hypothetical "post miracle" life. What do you see him doing or saying that coaxes them to work with him?
5. What bothers you about this approach to counseling? What do you like about it?
6. How would you follow up this exchange if you were the counselor here? What might you say, or ask next?
7. If you were the counselor here, what might you do differently that you think might make this exchange even more helpful for this couple?